

Old Testament Lesson—Deuteronomy 7:1-2

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

New Testament Lessons—Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

I feel a bit uneasy admitting this before everyone this morning, but (hey) we're all family here, right?

After all, if we can't talk about hard things with our church family—with folks we've committed to loving and supporting no matter what, with people we've covenanted with to meet each other where they are, then who can we talk about tough stuff with?

I believe the Church should be a place where we can and do discuss uncomfortable things—things the rest of the world just ignores or won't take seriously.

The Church is such a profound gift from God because, at its best—at our best, unlike other groups, we don't walk away from each other. We refuse to insult or dehumanize or view our neighbors as "less than" when we disagree. We strive—even yearn to meet each other where we are, both on the spiritual journey and the ideological one.

Other organizations and institutions of the world pack up their things and leave when the going gets rough—when they don't get their way. The Church is and must be different.

Because, friends, the tie that binds us is blessed. The tie that binds us is holy. How dare we tear asunder what God has joined together!

So, in that spirit, without further ado, here goes...I've got to admit this story about Jesus and the Canaanite woman just rubs me the wrong way. It kind of tarnishes your image of Jesus, doesn't it? Which feels really disappointing...devastating even...

From where I'm standing, I feel somewhat compelled to go right up to the guy in this story and say, "Excuse me, sir! Who do you think you are? Seriously, what's your problem?"

We're disappointed, perhaps, because...well...as Christians we worship this person! We follow him. We're called to imitate him as much as possible—in every facet of life. In some cases, we literally put him on a pedestal. So, what are we supposed to do now?

In my view, when it comes to Jesus, this is one of the most challenging stories of the Bible. It endangers this heartfelt picture of Christ many of us have built up over a lifetime. It leaves us feeling directionless...lost because this isn't the Jesus we know. This isn't the compassionate Jesus we love. This sounds like someone else—someone we don't like—someone we wouldn't want our children to look up to.

All of those things I just mentioned that the Church is supposed to be—this gift to the world—a gift because it's a welcoming people that doesn't insult or dehumanize others and refuses to treat anyone as “less than”—I mean, I hesitate to say it, but isn't Jesus doing all those things here? Well, isn't he?

Is he not treating this poor, desperate woman as less than? I think it's pretty obvious that he is. But, let's take a closer look anyway.

I wanted to pair this troubling story from Matthew with a snapshot from Deuteronomy because I thought you should have some context. And, just a reminder, context is key if you're studying Scripture. The more you have, the better off you are—especially when it comes to really difficult and upsetting stuff like what we're dealing with today.

I thought it'd be helpful for you to hear these commandments given to Jesus' ancestors. Remember, Christ and his disciples would've inherited these traditions from their families and worshipping communities. These ideas would've been passed down for generations, along with the rest of God's laws.

You see: Not only is this woman a stranger, she's a Gentile. She isn't Jewish. And not only is she a Gentile, she's the worst kind of Gentile—the worst kind of non-Jew. This woman's from Canaan! She's a Canaanite—a dirty, filthy Canaanite!

If you're in need of a quick memory refresher, Canaan is the classic enemy of Israel. The Canaanites are the oldest enemies of the Hebrew people. These people stood in the way of Israel's destiny. After the Exodus from Egypt, the Canaanites stood in between God's people and Israel's gift of the Promised Land.

So it's practically in the DNA of all Jews—of all Israelites to look at those from Canaan not only with suspicion, but with a distaste and a disgust developed over centuries.

How to treat this woman and her ilk isn't really a matter of debate. Deuteronomy puts it bluntly—clear as day. Here's the teaching—the one passed down to Jesus and his people: *Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy*. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

I know, right? Feels like we almost need to sit with that for a while—give it time to process. Alas, I wish we had more time to gather ourselves.

No mercy? I can't think of anything more starkly antithetical to God's word than that. There's nothing more contrary to what I know and what I've experienced about God and Christ than the prospect of showing others “no mercy.”

And yet, there it is: Make no covenant with them, and show them no mercy. And Lord if Jesus and his friends didn't follow that command to a T!

I don't want to belabor the point, but I think it's important for us to look closely at what's going on here. This unnamed woman, like so many before her and far too many since, isn't treated with dignity and deserves to be seen and heard.

I've no doubt this woman was well aware of the violent history between her people and the Israelites. And despite that—despite knowing that long ago, the ancestors of this teacher and his followers believed they possessed a divine right to purge this part of the earth of her ancestors and take the land by force in the name of their god...

...despite that awareness, she nevertheless has the audacity to approach this group, interrupt their business, and ask for their help! Can you imagine?

Seriously, this mother had to be in the deepest depths of absolute desperation to take the action she does. Matthew describes her daughter as being "tormented." I can't imagine being a parent and being able to live one second—to be calm about anything while my child's in the throes of such horrible distress.

I bet I'd be willing to do or say just about anything if it would alleviate my child's pain or anguish or torment. No, this mother isn't about to let any history or any potential threat or shaming to come between her and Someone who could save her little girl.

I want you to notice the first thing she says to Jesus. She cries out: *Have mercy on me!* Have mercy on me, she begs; if not for me, then for my child, please.

And the heartbreaking truth is that, by now, you should already know what the proper response from Jesus should be to the mother's cries—at least according to the Law passed down to him.

You already know how it all should end, right? You remember the words of Deuteronomy: Show them no mercy. Show her and her daughter no mercy.

And as hard as it is to get our heads around, Jesus actually follows that Law. Jesus obeys this ancient Jewish Law. He has absolutely no intention of showing any mercy here.

Jesus' intention is crystal clear from his response—or, rather, his lack of response. Have you ever been around someone who says something just so downright ridiculous that you don't even feel it's worth the oxygen to respond?

Friends, Jesus doesn't even give her the respect of saying, "No." Instead, at first, he completely ignores her—pretends she's not there. It feels cruel, doesn't it?

...kind of like when you drive by someone begging on the street. You might have some money, you might not. Your heart probably sinks for just a second, but then you decide to keep your eyes looking forward—looking in any direction except at the human being beside you—pretending they're not there.

Except, in our story this morning, Jesus' heart doesn't sink at all—isn't moved with pity even for a moment. Why? Because she's not worth his pity! She's a Canaanite, and (remember) he's supposed to *Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.*

But, hey, let's not forget! Jesus isn't the only disappointment here, right? The disciples, too, don't feel the need to offer this poor woman even a shred of dignity, much less their time and attention.

After getting the humiliating silent treatment, she remains in their midst—undeterred. Apparently, she's not taking the hint. She's not giving up. The disciples begin to think, "What gives with this lady?"

Clearly, the cold shoulder isn't working. If they're going to get rid of her, they're going to have to take it up a notch. They're going to have to say something to her—something ugly—to drive her away: *And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."*

It's clear that, for once, Jesus and his friends are on the same page: *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

As much as we hoped he wouldn't, Jesus agrees. It's true: She's not getting the message. Instead of just yelling things at a distance, she decides to march right up to Jesus, refusing to be ignored: *But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."*

All right—that's it. She's gone too far. If they're going to get her off their backs, he'll have to say something—something definitive—something convincing—something to shut her down. And he does...

He certainly does...And it's a doozy: *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* It isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. The dogs. Now the implied insults—the unspoken cruelty gets verbalized.

Up to this point, Jesus has basically told her, "You're not my problem. I'm not your shepherd. Get away from us, dog."

Surely that's enough to break this woman's spirit? Surely, now, she'll leave them alone? Sure now, for the love of all that is holy, they'll be rid of this Canaanite!

Surely, after enduring such mistreatment, that'll do the trick? Surely, right? Surely, Jesus and his friends thought so. But they were mistaken. And praise God they were mistaken!

Just as soon as these guys think they can finally move on from this minor inconvenience, she completely reframes their entire mission and purpose. As soon as they think they can close the book on her, she shows that the book of God's love is still being written—that God's mercies are broader and wider than even Christ thought possible!

[Jesus] answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table—the third time she's addressed Jesus as Lord, by the way.

Yes, Lord, I know that even the crumbs of your love can sustain and nourish us. Yes, Lord, I'm not Jewish but I believe you can heal my daughter. Yes, Lord, I may not be within your flock but you're my Shepherd still—even if you don't know it, yet.

I don't want to be hyperbolic—don't want to blow things out of proportion, but something incredible happens here. Something amazing, something divine gets inside Jesus' heart. Something holy opens his mind and he's sees this woman with new eyes.

Christ's entire worldview shifts fundamentally because, for the first time, he sees her—really sees her. He sees a faith in God his own disciples can only aspire to! This isn't my enemy. This is my beloved sheep: *Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

Woman, great is your faith. Woman...it's not an insult, it's the way Jesus addresses his mother—fitting since she's taught him, perhaps, the most valuable lesson about God of his life.

Woman, great is thy faithfulness; for God has shown me new mercies this morning.

This unnamed mother is ignored, insulted, and dehumanized. And, nevertheless, she persisted! She persisted like a mother who would not forsake her nursing child. She persisted in her faith. And I'm hard-pressed to think of another person in Scripture with a more towering and unwavering faith.

We don't know her name. But in my book, in my heart, this Canaanite mother is a hero and should be considered one of the greatest saints of the Church. She opened the eyes of her Lord! She moved his heart!

It's because of her that, at the end of Matthew's gospel, the risen Christ calls us to spread God's love to all nations because all peoples—Canaanites especially and all those who've been

historically oppressed and ostracized, are part of God's family and ever-widening circle of love. No one is outside God's graces and no one is to be excluded from the Body of Christ.

So, was Jesus prejudiced? In all honesty, I feel that's basically the same as asking, "Was Jesus actually a human being?"

It's the same as asking, "Was he a real person? Did he have authentic, real-world feelings? Did he experience the things we experience? Was he from somewhere real—somewhere specific—born into a family and culture and a time about which he had no control?"

The answer's yes—of course. Yes to all the above.

Are we, too, prejudiced? Isn't that like asking questions like: Aren't we, too, born into particular circumstances we've no control over? Aren't we, too, subject to certain unconscious biases that affect our behavior and how we treat others? Weren't we all "raised a certain way"?

Of course we were! Are we prejudiced? Of course we are. That's part of what Matthew shows us, today, my friends! No matter your ideological bent—no matter your political stripe, we're all biased people with limited perspectives. And that means we need each other.

So if you're convinced you possess the absolute, objective truth—that you lack any and all bias, Jesus says you better think again. If you're convinced you've got it all figured out and the views of "those people" don't matter, Jesus says, are you sure about that? If we're committed to living out our days in an "us" versus "them" world, then we're committing ourselves to ignorance and injustice.

Jesus shows us that as long as we continue to see "them" as the enemy, then we're acting as if we decide the limits of God's mercies—that we can open and close the gates of heaven—that we, somehow, have authority to condemn, to judge, to label, to exclude. If Jesus can make room in his heart for "them," for "those people," so can we. So must we.

And just to give credit where credit's due, it was a mother of great faith that opened the eyes of our Savior—who taught the Teacher.

And some people still say women shouldn't lead or preach!

Lord, please!

Amen.